

"En Route"

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

J. K. HUYSMANS belonged to the Order of the Absolutes. He was one of those curious beings doomed to search for the Devil and who found God—to reverse the saying attributed to Strindberg about himself. Huysmans, like Flaubert and Baudelaire, was one of the Colossi of Ennui. He was born tired, having played out all incarnations, having snipped somewhere on all sensations, having died unto many modes of sin and love in lives remote and unremembered. His psychic apparatus came into the world like a "movie" screen on which all combinations of crime, frenzy and poetic manipulations had been tried. All he got here was a dismal remembering. "Old stuff" was the world judgment written on his dyspeptic, pessimistic countenance.

Paul Bourget, in his magnificent *Essays in Contemporaneous Psychology*, has analyzed definitively the Huysmans "type" in his studies on Flaubert, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle and others. They are the men who forerun their own lives, prophets of their own future, men whose

youth is taken up in pondering on the vanity of their days to come. Beautiful pastime if you can write like these men! Godlike doom if you are an artist and can give the world a *Temptation of Saint Anthony* or *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Poèmes Tragiques* or an *En Route*.

It is the grandeur of pessimism that it gives us wisdom and art. Despair and pain breed the Beauty that the world keeps. It is the heaven rending ironies and canticles from the Prometheus of art, chained to their granite Calvaries, that endure. The human race is redeemed in its curses, uttered through the lips of its prophets. Pity the poor in spirit who never cursed his natal day! He is made of such stuff as punk is made of and his little life is rounded in a ladies' sewing circle.

So, gentle reader and ye smug brethren of the pretty little "bedtime story," you are not going to be "amused" when you read J. K. Huysmans' *En Route*, translated from the French by G. Kegan Paul and brought out by E. P. Dutton & Co. If you love the subtleties and mysteries of the psychology of Catholicism, if you love great writing and if there are pinions in your brain wherewith to wing you to heaven or plunge you to hell, if you love the condensed sentence that rocks you into a far meditation, or you are an Alpinist of great, high towering images and find a pleasure in being bitten into an admirable frenzy by vital, out of the dugs similes—why, here is your book; one you will not sell or pawn or ram away among your "current" reading.

En Route is the mystical diary of Durtal, who is no other than J. K. Huysmans himself. Durtal is a Lucullus of sensations, a Parisian who passed in and out of his hells with the ease of Satan himself. But it fell upon a certain day that "conversion"—or at least the need of conversion—came to him. Conversion, says William James, is simply the rise over the threshold of consciousness of another self, a buried ego that resurrects on an Easter morn of the spirit. Durtal walks toward his Damascus, conversing with spirits damned and spirits holy and spirits lewd. Hell is paved with many gardens if you know the country. The monastery La Trappe is his end "If they [his literary acquaintances in Paris] knew how inferior they are to the lowest of the lay brothers! If they could imagine how the divine intoxication of a Trappist swine-herd interests me more than all their conversations and all their books! Ah! Lord, that I might live, live in the shadow of the prayers of humble Brother Simeon!"

En Route is a perfect thesaurus of musical, artistic and religious criticism. After reading Huysmans one grasps more completely the superficiality and hopeless imitateness of George Moore. For Huysmans has lived in hell; Moore only goes a jaunting there. Huysmans sleeps with Satan; Moore only leaves his visiting card at his Majesty's mansion and makes notes on the servants and the outbuildings, being, as he is, only a Dublin reporter with a Parisian high school education.

Durtal drops into St. Sulpice. He listens to the sermon. "If these cooks of the soul had any skill, if they served their clients with delicate meats, theological essences, gravies of prayer, concentrated sauces of ideas, they would vegetate misunderstood by their flocks. So, on the whole, it is all for the best. The low water mark of the clergy must conform to the level of the faithful, and indeed," he concludes ironically, "Providence has provided carefully for this."

Huysmans's Catholic Church is esoteric, aristocratic, a retreat for the elect of sin and the obscurely damned; really something epicurean, a penetralium for adepts, a Pantheon for fallen but proud Lucifers. In fact Catholicism is, with Huysmans, a branch, a detail of Art. "Finally," he says, "Durtal has been brought back to religion by art. More even than his disgust for life, art had been the irresistible magnet which drew him to God."

The man has the eye of a great painter of the Dutch school. He sees everything vividly and in his great prose lays on all the colors of the spectrum. "The crowd as it ran in the cruciform mould of the church became itself an enormous cross, living and crawling, silent and sombre." He says of a saint: "I have read her works and she gives me the idea of a stainless lily, but a metallic lily, forged of wrought iron." And again in a moment of doubt, "True goodness would have consisted in inventing nothing, creating nothing, in leaving all as it was, in nothingness, in peace."

The book is the book of a man sick with the sacred sickness, the sickness of

Lucifer and Buddha and Thomas à Kempis and Tolstoy. It is the sickness done in great prose of one of the most astonishing products of the age. And, come who among us who is worth his psychic salt is not thus sick unto death? *En Route* is no man's road to redemption.

You may like his road or may not—but go with him anyway for the sake of the hallucinatingly beautiful and sombre scenery on the way

EN ROUTE. By J. K. HUYSMANS. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$2.50.

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